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CANDIDATE SUICIDE: HOW TO COMMIT IT

A recent internet search revealed the following listings on websites and postings on blogs:

- a candidate who gave her email address as grumpy_grandma@domain.com. (Lesson: if you use a fun email address or a family email address such as thewaltonsfamily@waltonsmountain.com keep it for personal emails and register a different email address for your job search)
- someone called Brian who sent his CV out with his name spelled BrAln, and wondered why he had had no responses to his applications after two months. (Lesson: check, check and check again. Do not rely on your spellchecker to pick up errors)
- a job applicant whose cover letter said he was sending it to the HR director as a 'courtesy' before 'making any attempt to sidestep their authority and going directly to the 'real decision-maker'. (Lesson: trying to be smart in job applications is likely to backfire on you)
- an applicant who said their CV was posted to a particular website from which the recruiter should download it. The recruiter, naturally, did not bother. (Lesson: you need to make things easy for the recruiter, not make work for them)

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Europe's largest organisation for human resource professionals, has provided further examples:

- a CV in connection with a quality control technician vacancy listed, under key skills, 'attension to detail'
- a candidate wrote that in January 2207 she would be

doing an NVQ Level 3 in Customer Service. Formidable forward planning ...

Some of the CIPD's examples were from interviews, including the preliminary telephone interviews which are often carried out by recruiters in advance of face-to-face ones:

- during a telephone interview for a prospective IT trainer, the interviewer, concerned that an applicant was a 'techie' who thought he could train, asked what his preferred learning style was. His reply was 'I tell them what button to press in what order and the information required for each data field'
- another telephone interviewee, when asked what he thought of multiple intelligence theory, said, 'Well, some people have learning problems and we need to take account of their needs.' (Lesson: every field has its own jargon, and it is there for a reason: if you claim to be in that field, be sure you are up to speed)
- a candidate for a job within the airport retail sector, which experiences quiet periods between flights, was asked what he would do to keep himself busy during these times; his reply was 'plug in my iPod and read a magazine'
- an interviewee for a fundraising post gabbled incoherently at great speed, interrupted the interviewers several times and kept sniffing. He had slightly suspicious-looking white marks on his nose ('We found a foil wrap in the gents where he had been prior to interview')
- an interviewee for an admin job that involved creating and updating spreadsheets and databases was asked about his IT skills; he went on to describe (albeit rather vaguely) a spreadsheet he had created in his current role. 'All became clear when we asked the very next candidate the same question and he went on to talk in much more detail about

the same spreadsheet: they were colleagues both under threat of redundancy in their existing roles and the first chap had clearly decided to pinch the second chap's spreadsheet as an example'

- an interviewee who, when asked at the end of the interview for details of referees, said she did not watch football
- a candidate for a project manager's post, asked which aspect of project management he did not like, replied 'change'
- a young man, asked what retailing experience he had had, answered, 'I have sold doughnuts for a day' (the company with the job opening was 'a very high-profile department store offering high-quality merchandise and customer service')
- a candidate for a deputy post answered every question put to him by first repeating the question, exam-style
- an applicant for senior manager post, asked how he would deal with a difficult staff member, said that he would dismiss them on the spot
- a candidate for an electrician's job, who qualified for one respondent's worst-ever interview, made it clear from the start he had a problem with women (the respondent, and lead interviewer, was female): 'When I asked him a question, he replied to the man I was interviewing with. Halfway through, he started picking a scab on the side of his face. It started pouring with blood. He promptly wiped the blood off with his finger and licked it clean.'

Even when the recruitment process is complete, some candidates will not accept the recruiter's decision gracefully:

- 'We have had a couple of instances where rejected candidates have felt the need to write and complain

that they were not given the job. One who had applied for a part-time sales adviser position felt that as she had a degree (with honours) there was no doubt in her mind that she should have been offered the position, as "it's only retail, after all". She sent her letter to the CEO!

- another unsuccessful candidate was most put out that she had been interviewed by a young lady who was Spanish, and asked to be re-interviewed by someone who was English as she felt this was why she had not got the job.

In addition to the above, the CIPD respondents cited numerous examples of candidates who:

- made no eye contact during the entire interview
- made sexist comments
- had no idea what the company did.

All of these represent lost opportunities for someone to get a job. The UK may currently have a skills shortage and employers are keen to employ talented people, but they are not desperate. If a candidate cannot be bothered to make the effort when they should be trying to make a good impression, why should anyone think they would do so as an employee?

While the examples given above illustrate what *not* to do during the job application process, the rest of this chapter will show how you can create a positive impression.

CVS AND APPLICATION LETTERS/EMAILS

Your CV and introductory letter or email will have a strong influence on whether or not you get an interview. The decision between a 'no', a 'regret, but hold' (you are not exactly what we are looking for at present but we will keep your details on file) and an 'invite for interview' can be made in as little as 30 seconds.

LETTERS OF APPLICATION

Your immaculately presented CV and beautifully written letter of application, or the application form that took you two hours to write, can be scanned by a recruiter and a decision made in less than a minute. The recruiter first filters out all of the people who do not match the selection criteria, keeping the people who do. When you apply online you may well find that your application is scanned by software to find 'keywords'. If they are not there you may receive an automatic 'thank-you but no thank-you' response, and that rejection could be triggered just because you typed 'ProductManager' instead of 'Product Manager', and ignored your mistake when you ran the spellchecker.

'You'll reduce your chances if your CV and covering letter are too old-fashioned and your supporting statement overflows with details of every job undertaken but is not specific to the job description.' (*Sandra Culham, Centre Manager, Sign Post*)

Your application letter or email is usually the first thing an employer sees, so it is important that it makes a positive impression. Here are some things to bear in mind when writing the letter.

- Use a powerful opening sentence, perhaps along the lines of: *'I would like to apply for the position of administration supervisor as I believe that I have the qualities which you have outlined in your advertisement.'*
- Introduce your three top skills or qualities which match you to the job – but do not re-write your CV. For more advice on how to do this, see below
- Because the letter is all about you it is easy to find yourself starting every sentence with 'I' – but try very hard to avoid this

- Make your letter the right length – more than just a couple of sentences, but no more than one page
- Be precise – make sure you refer to the job title and quote the reference in the introduction to the letter: the recruiter could be recruiting for a number of similar positions
- Be formal and not over-familiar. Do not address the person you are approaching by their first name
- Make the application letter specific to the job. With word-processing it so easy to do this and there is just no excuse for bland, one-size-fits-all letters. What these say is that the applicant cannot be bothered to write something tailored to the specific vacancy and employing organisation. Use key phrases from the job advertisement in the letter and refer to the strongest, most relevant achievements listed in your CV
- Present the letter well, in the same font as your CV. If you are using the postal system, print it on to white A4 paper; enclose your letter and CV in a quality white envelope and use a first-class stamp (one personnel manager admits that she once had so many applications for a secretarial job that she rejected all applications in brown envelopes or bearing second-class stamps)
- Use the spellchecker and then, for good measure, ask a friend to proofread your letter and CV
- End on a positive statement of what you can bring to the organisation and how you look forward to hearing from them
- Unless specifically asked to do so, do not send a handwritten letter
- End the letter with 'Yours sincerely' if you are writing to 'Dear Mr/Ms [name]', or 'Yours faithfully' for 'Dear Sir/Madam' – and do not forget to sign it.

Most of these principles also apply to emails, but in addition bear the following in mind:

- Do not be in too much of a hurry to press 'send'. Make sure you have checked and re-checked the spelling and grammar, and make sure you have written full words in formal English
- Your email address can present you in an unprofessional light. If yours is grumpy_grandpa@thepub.com or linda@shopstilldrops.com, get another one for your job search and keep the fun one for friends and family. You can open a free email address at many sites, including Yahoo or Google's gmail
- Be specific in the subject line: for example, 'Job application: Distribution Centre Manager – ref Ch/276'. Do not try to be clever, cryptic or amusing
- Make sure your attachments are accessible and can be opened by the recipient: most can read MS Word, and all can read .txt documents
- The content should read like a cover letter – because that is what it is, and it has to do the same selling job
- In emails, never use emoticons, such as (-: This is a formal business communication, not a message to one of your pals
- Before you click 'send', do make sure that you have attached your CV, that it is the correct version, and that it is not entitled Bill's CV version 783 (which suggests that your level of success with other applications has not been that high).

It is as well to be aware that, despite the Age Regulations that came into force in October 2006, discrimination on grounds of age has not been stamped out and there is no shortage of evidence that ageist principles are still applied at application stage, as well as later in the recruitment process. Linked to the issue of age are assumptions that someone in mid-life or older will want a high salary to reflect their qualifications and experience. Such assumptions are discriminatory in themselves and can be a particular drawback if you are trying

to change your career direction. Addressing the issue in your letter of application, perhaps by saying that you fully appreciate that you would be working at a lower level, and for a lower salary, than you have previously, could help you overcome this kind of knee-jerk reaction.

'I kept being told I was over-qualified. I sent out numerous applications and haven't been offered one interview. One of the arguments used against hiring someone over 50 is that I wouldn't be happy with the money on offer. This is ridiculous, because if I was not happy with the salary I wouldn't be applying for the job.' (*professional woman, 53, seeking to change career*)

'Being "over-qualified" has been the most common issue that I have come across, along with being interviewed by younger people who feel threatened by my experience.' (*senior marketing professional, female, 48*)

It is also as well to be aware that people who have previously been employed at director level or run their own business face a particularly tough challenge when trying to find employment, even if they more than satisfy all the skills and experience requirements, because they are likely to be seen as a threat by younger, less qualified managers.

A very senior auditor, who had also run his own auditing business, found it very difficult to find a job at the age of 54. Eventually he found a temporary one, two grades below his previous job, where he felt 'humiliated' because he was answerable to someone with 14 years' less experience than himself.

For people in a similar position, self-employment (see chapter 6) could be a better option.

Those who have run their own companies as sole traders or in partnership may find that the skills and experience they accumulated

in that role count for little with agencies and employers because there is little or no formal training or qualification underpinning it. If this is an issue for you, taking a few courses, possibly with learndirect (see page 42), could help to improve your chances of employment.

TOP TIPS FOR OLDER JOB APPLICANTS

Look for jobs where there is a specific requirement for experience.

- Stress your *levels* of experience and ensure that your CV *sells* your skills and experience.
- Get some basic computer skills if you have none.
- Emphasise positive points, e.g. loyalty, and no problems with childcare responsibilities.
- Stress the absence of domestic crises potential as you have no small children. Stress your flexibility concerning leave requirements and working hours.
- Keep an open mind about learning new skills, e.g. enrol on open learning courses to acquire computer skills or improve basic skills (if required) or just check on what courses are available via these centres. For example, short courses in health and safety, or first aid in the workplace, are often available. (*John Davis, Regional Employer Engagement Team, Jobcentre Plus*)

MATCHING SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE TO THE JOB

To do this you will need a copy of the job description, a document that states the duties, level of decision-making responsibility, reporting lines and performance indicators (how you will be assessed in the job).

You may need to request this document from the organisation. If no job description exists, ask yourself why not. There may be a good reason, or it may be that the employer has not yet decided what the duties will be (which could be potential source of future conflict), or it may well be that the organisation has an informal struc-

ture and culture, and your job description may simply be 'whatever is needed to get the job done', as is often the case with small or start-up companies.

Re-read the advertisement, the application form and your CV (see below) alongside the job description, to be sure you understand what it is that the organisation is asking for. Highlight key phrases within it, then think hard about how you could demonstrate, from your own working background, your ability to match the requirements.

There is quite an art to the matching of skills and experience to the requirements of a job, and to understand fully how to do this, especially if you have been away from the job-hunting scene for a while, consider spending some time using a skills assessment toolkit such as the one produced by Fairplay and available via the TAEN (The Age and Employment Network) website: <http://www.taen.org.uk/resources/individuals.htm>.

This will enable you to analyse your experience objectively and identify your transferable skills – technical, managerial, strategic or interpersonal – and to show, through your achievements, how you have used them. Working through this kind of assessment is invaluable preparation for interviews, too, as it encourages you to look at all areas of your life, not just your paid employment, to identify what your experience of life can bring to the job in question. This might include, for example, dealing with money, communicating with people, customer service, solving problems and resolving conflict, managing projects, working within a team, managing change, or using IT.

CVS

Your CV is your greatest marketing tool. Sadly, it is not possible to give definitive advice to the effect that if you do X, Y and Z in a CV you will automatically get an interview. Recruiters have personal preferences in how they like to see CVs written, in addition to which your CV is a very personal document and in the final analysis you are the best judge of whether your CV represents you in as good a light as possible.

There is a debate as to whether photographs should be included in CVs. Most recruiters suggest that unless you are applying for a job as an actor or a model, there is no need for a photograph.

Unless the employer has asked for it, do not include your date of birth in applications (never raise potential barriers with employers). Note that there is a common misconception that it is now unlawful for an employer to ask for an applicant's date of birth. Although it is not unlawful, it may be unwise on the employer's part to ask for this information because the decision to do so could be challenged.

Stories continue to circulate about applicants sending off CVs stating their age to potential employers and being rejected (or receiving no response at all), but being invited for interview after submitting the same CV with no reference to age.

If potential employers discriminate against you on grounds of age they are acting unlawfully (age discrimination regulations have been in place since October 2006 to outlaw such practice). It is very difficult to know, and still harder to prove, that you have been de-selected because of your age, but there are steps you can take if you suspect you have fallen foul of age discrimination: see chapter 8 of *How to Recognise Cases of Age Discrimination: a guide for workers*, a publication in which Help the Aged and TAEN (The Age and Employment Network) were involved:

www.taen.org.uk/publications/ad_guide_for_workers.pdf.

It is encouraging to note that many organisations are now adopting an age-positive policy and welcome applications from mature

'Standard Jobcentre application forms do not ask for date of birth, so employers cannot sift by age. Additionally, people may wish not to include their date of birth or age on a CV. CVs should focus on skills, competencies and achievements. To increase their chances job seekers should do confidence-building and interview technique training.' (Karol Doveston, NEPL (Able to Work Project), Jobcentre Plus Liaison Manager)

'Make sure that your CV is skills-based and doesn't go back too far. Express your enthusiasm to learn and develop new skills in your covering letter. Emphasise how transferable your skills are. Demonstrate your ability to multi-task. Never, ever think that you are too old.

'If you are going to apply for a junior position that is a change of direction, say in the covering letter that although you expect they may have been considering a school or college leaver, just think how much more they will get in terms of work ethics and responsibility. Sometimes, pointing out the reason why you may be rejected can turn a negative into a positive. It has worked well for some of my clients.'

(Sandra Culham, Centre Manager, Sign Post)

applicants. None the less, recruitment advisers generally suggest that applicants leave their age out of their CV.

Another debate centres on whether job applicants should use a chronological CV or a functional CV. Chronological CVs are the most common. These track your career from start to present day, usually starting with your current or most recent position and taking the reader back step by step to the beginning of your working life. Use a chronological CV when the job you have applied for is a logical successor to your previous jobs. Previous jobs show that your responsibilities have increased as your experience has broadened. The chronological CV can also demonstrate a solid career history. However, this kind of CV may not be the best format for older candidates.

The functional CV or skills CV is often recommended for older applicants or for people changing career direction. The functional CV puts the emphasis on your skills and experiences without being heavily biased towards a particular job. You may also consider using a functional CV if you have worked for obscure organisations, or you want to hide the fact that you were self-employed.